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HEAVEN ANTICIPATED.

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BY

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“To depart and to be with Christ, which is far better.”
Phil. 1: 23.



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HEAVEN ANTICIPATED.

1. *CHRIST THE HEAVEN OF BELIEVERS.*

“WHERE I am there shall ye be also.”

There are phrases regarding the future with which we are all familiar. We speak of a future rest from all our cares, toils, and sufferings; and we think of the dead as being happy; but there are very many who attach no definite ideas to such phrases, to whom they express little more than what the heathen profess, and who assume that nothing more can be known. They have such a feeble consciousness of any living communion with Christ now, that they scarcely ever think of what he is to be to

them hereafter. They taste not the "power of the world to come."

What then is it which constitutes the true heaven of Christians? While the idea of heaven necessarily includes immortality, life, peace, blessedness, with an intensity of meaning we cannot measure, yet the centre of all its glory and the source of all its joy is the presence of Jesus Christ. There is *no place* for the Christian after death where Christ is not. There are indeed "many mansions" prepared, where the mighty multitudes which no man can number shall be gathered from all lands and from every kindred and tongue. Yet these mansions form but the eternal home of Jesus Christ and his redeemed people. No soul can enter these and be told, "Christ is not here." "Where he is, there shall ye be also." And the presence, the guidance, the communion which shall be

enjoyed with and through Jesus Christ, exalted in our humanity, form one chief and central source of the heavenly joy. Jesus "the Lamb" is to be the light thereof, and Jesus the Shepherd is he who will lead his sheep to the spiritual pasture. "To be with Christ" is thus the hope of the believer.

Now, one effect which this thought should have upon Christians is to give them great peace and calm of spirit in thinking of the future. If, without a firm conviction in Christ's presence, we give reins to our imagination, and ask, as many are apt to do on their dying beds when compelled to think of the future, "Where shall I be in a few weeks or days? what shall I see? what shall I be doing? how shall I exist?" and the like, everything is apt to become confused, impalpable, and from its very indefiniteness to fill us with

fear, and make us cling to what we have been long familiar with, rather than yield ourselves, except as a terrible necessity, to what is so dim and shadowy and uncongenial. But in such a mood of mind, the humblest Christian, the poorest saint, the child who can understand a father's or a mother's love, may find great strength and comfort from taking in this one thought—to enter the future, to be in heaven, to be in glory, is *to be with Christ*. “There must be there,” he might say, “a countless sum of things I cannot comprehend, conditions of being, memories and hopes, sights and sounds, panoramas of glory, a society vast and infinitely exalted. All this I understand not now. Nevertheless there is one person there whom I do know—Jesus Christ. He is the author of all, the ruler of all, the adored of all, and he is my Brother, bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.

This Person is a real man, with my human heart and affections. This Person lived for years here, and knows me, and all my nervous, infirm feelings, better than any other. He remembers I am dust. This Person once was grieved, and wept, and agonized, and prayed the cup might pass from him. This Person sympathized with and comforted men like myself, full of infirmity, saying, 'Let not your hearts be troubled.' This Person lived and died for me, and I belong to him, and his joy is one with my salvation as a believer. There is no such tender heart on earth as his who is in that place; and he is waiting to receive me, just as he has received every one there, men and women, who once were as anxious and concerned and filled with wonder as I am. He is heaven. O Lord, into thy hands I commit my spirit; and into thy hands I ~~can~~ commit my dearest,

yea, the tender child of my bosom. Take me to thyself, for where thou art, there and there only I wish to be."

It was thus that Jacob, when entering Egypt, an old man and a humble shepherd, who had lived all his life among the quiet hills of Palestine, was not awed by the great court of Pharaoh, the magnificent palace, and all the splendor which surrounded the greatest monarch of his time. All was lost in one thought: *Joseph is alive, and he is there*; and when he entered that new and strange land, he saw nothing else, thought of nothing else than his beloved, as he fell on his neck with tears of unutterable joy.

And yet this simplest view of heaven, on which all can repose, urges us to the contemplation of what it involves. Should our weak sight be unable to bear more light than the presence of Jesus, yet we

may in him see more if we will. He is the centre of glory, but wider than the visible heavens is the circumference. He is the sun of the soul, but the rays stream forth into the infinite. Our being *with* Christ evidently infers *fellowship with him*. It must be so. Happiness with a person and from a person, is inseparable from friendship with that person. Hereafter that fellowship will be perfect. The oneness between himself and his disciples for which he prayed on that night will be fully realized. There will be oneness in love to God, oneness in obedience of will, oneness in peace, joy, and glory. The quiet contemplation of such a state of being as this, lasting through eternity, cannot but elevate the soul, combined with the assurance that it *must* be ours if we are saved at all, and not for ever lost. To be one with Christ, to see him as he is; to be like him;

to be made perfectly conformable to his image; to be glorified together with him—let us only try and realize such a consummation to our life, such a result of all our progress, such a fulfilment of all our hopes, such a substance obtained by our faith. Never more to have our love to God or man marred or obscured by the slightest defect; never darkened by the shadow of suspicion, envy, or jealousy; never disturbed by the possibility of alienation or diminution; never checked by defective sympathy; never suspended by separation or distance; never saddened by aught unworthy of the sacrifice of our whole heart. All our trifling and contemptible vanity, all that caused our bitter tears, our hearty repentance, or disturbed our peace and were stumbling-blocks in our progress—all gone, and gone for ever! And in their stead that character as ours which made

Christ so lovely here, and so perfect and lovely in the sight of God. Only think of it, that you or I or any one we love shall during the life of God, world without end, be like Christ! And yet this is implied in going to heaven, in being happy, in being with Christ; and there is no neutral ground between this and a soul unlike Christ in everything, and full of the hell of evil.

But while this perfect likeness to Christ must ever be the only rational and therefore the only true idea of glory, yet this is not all. For if all the redeemed are like Christ, *they are like each other* in the possession of the same character; and this implies the closest intimacy which can possibly subsist in the nature of things between living persons, for it is as real as that between God the Father and Jesus the Son. And if so, then whatever differences there may be between the intellects of the most

advanced in heaven, who have existed there and studied for thousands of years, and the poorest peasant or weakest child who has entered it yesterday, yet no such differences can destroy the unity of love. The love which binds the greatest man on earth to his babe on his knee, or the peasant father to the son who has become distinguished in learning and acquired a world-wide fame by his deeds, but who is yet clasped to the breast and bound to it by parental love in which all other distinctions are lost, but faintly shadow the perfect oneness which even on their first meeting must be secured for the children of God among all who share the mind and spirit of that Jesus in whom all are united and by whom all are redeemed. When he takes the brethren to himself, he takes them to one another. His arms enfold all. His heart fills and attracts all. There

can be no strangers among the brothers and sisters in that home.

But this oneness with Christ and fellowship with him, this possession of heaven in the possession of himself, necessarily implies *the possession of all things with him*. It is much easier for us to sympathize with a future existence whose enjoyment is the glory of scenery, the softness of music, or the refined delight which springs from the pursuit and acquisition of truth. For all this kind of happiness may be shared by us irrespective of the spiritual mind, and without religion, and, to some extent, without even morality. So that we are not warranted in concluding that a man has any relish for the heaven of Christ who might naturally desire many things which belong to it; no more than a prodigal, who longs to see the pictures and to hear the music in his father's house ne-

cessarily longs to see his father, or prefers him to them all. On the other hand, we may rest assured that the nature which our Lord has given us, and which he has made capable of receiving so much elevating gratification from such powers, will be fully satisfied from these, when the higher portion of man's being is brought into fellowship with Christ. The promise of "where I am there ye shall be also," the assurance that we are to be in his Father's house, in a place which he has gone to prepare for us—carries with it the assurance of its adornment with such art, workmanship, and glory, as will be worthy of the Creator of the universe. Consider only how he has adorned our globe—this mansion in his Father's house, with which we associate so much sin and misery; for it is Christ who has fashioned this earth, with all which it contains capable of de-

lighting the tastes, stimulating the imagination, and furnishing materials for the fancy of man. All which has filled the poet with rapture, all the splendor of scenery, whatever is sublime in snowy mountains, green valleys, hoary forests, or fruitful plains—in the ocean, in storm or calm, in its winding shore or beetling cliffs, in its gorgeous cloud-land with its rising or setting suns; in all that is superb or beautiful in color, or graceful and stately in form; in the songs of summer-woods, or the ruder minstrelsy of stormy wind or roaring cataract—all, all, and ten thousand times more than words can express, which constitute earth's glory, is the design of Christ, the handiwork of Christ, and adapted to the physical organization and mental constitution of man. And not less from Him are all those powers of legitimate delight which are supplied by the art of man.

He it is who has fashioned the wondrous artist who can reproduce nature idealized by genius, in the picture or statue. He it is who has given power to men to produce harmonious sounds by voice and instrument which so possess, overpower, and elevate our feelings. He it is who has created the poet, to shed on all "the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration and the poet's dream"—to Christ we owe all! How humbling is it to think of the Christless and godless idolatry with which his dear gifts have been enjoyed by us, how seldom we name their Giver, and how often man, in his base, paltry selfishness, has perverted and adored them, crying to them, "Ye are our gods!" And very like Himself it is, that in love he should continue to give, opening his hand liberally, if so be men be won thereby to the higher end; and also most like him to

take upon himself the form of a servant, and to be despised and rejected of men, to be reviled and misunderstood unto this day, if so be that by self-sacrificing love—before which the glory of all material things fades utterly away—he would redeem man, and prepare him for the highest future of which his nature is capable. But when he attains that higher, it follows that he will possess the lower. It cannot be that the Son, the Creator, will be less powerful when he is also Redeemer, or less willing to show forth his glory as the author of all beauty before the eyes of his redeemed. It cannot be that the place he is preparing for them he best loves—for whom he made and prepared the world, and whom he has saved by his life's blood—whether it be a star, or includes a galaxy of worlds, or is as a metropolis, a heavenly Jerusalem to the Holy Land of all his magnificent uni-

verse—it cannot be that it will display less, but rather infinitely more, material glory, yea, be a worthy expression of all the creative genius, the divine taste, the infinite love, of Him who had made, adorned, and glorified with beauty this lower world of sin and misery.

II.—CHRIST WILL MEET THE BELIEVER AT DEATH.

“I WILL come again, and take you to myself; that where I am, ye may be also.”

It is unnecessary for my present purpose to consider the various meanings attached to the coming of Christ, or the different periods which are described as times when “the Lord comes.” It is sufficient to recognize the fact that he will meet the believer at death and come *for him*. This should not seem strange to those whose trust is in a living Person, and

not merely in something said or done by that Person. What He said and did enters indeed into the faith we have in him, and makes it possible; but the faith by which we live centres in Jesus himself, the Son of God; and that faith would perish or fall back into a mere belief in abstract truth if we could for a moment suppose that He, "whom having not seen we love," was himself ignorant of us and had no personal love to us. But if such a thought cannot be entertained by any who on earth have experienced the love of Christ, and who associate his name with his constant presence, and know the continual strength and comfort they have derived from him who is with his people *always*, even to the end of the world, how can it be imagined that his personal care should cease at death, and at the very moment when it is most required?

It cannot be that He who has led us through the wilderness will withdraw his presence and aid, and leave us to pass alone through the swellings of Jordan; or that He who has been a present help in every time of need will fail to help in our last extremity. If so, then this thought is sufficient to supply all the strength and comfort we require in our dying hour, and to banish all those fears which are created by our weak, human hearts, or by that unbelief which, refusing light, remains in the dimness in which those spectres are seen that alone occasion our fear. We are all subject more or less to such anxieties, in proportion to the vividness of our fancy, the nervousness of our temperament, or the force of our natural affections and relish for the palpable realities of life. There is to every man a sense of loss in parting with every material thing he has

ever possessed, his wealth, his business, the fruit of his long years of industry, and the body in which he has lived; there is a sense of dreariness in the thought of his body, which almost seems himself, being carried out and buried among the dead, and there to lie beneath the beating storms of ages, until it has been absorbed into the elements, and only in a new form to be gathered up and revived when the voice of God calls it forth. There is the feeling of loneliness in going off on the mysterious and unknown voyage, the dearest objects of our love accompanying us to the shore, but no one able to step within the dusky barge that in darkness is to bear us away. Added to such thoughts as these, are the possibilities that death may come in some dread and violent form, or what is equally painful to flesh and blood, in an agonizing disease, in which we slowly pace

our funeral march to the grave, and can almost number the steps that are to bring us there.

Now surely it is enough to counter-balance all such real or purely fanciful thoughts about death, and to invest it with a very different aspect, if we see it but as that moment in our history when Jesus Christ comes himself for us and to take us to himself. We picture death as a hideous figure coming to destroy; let us rather picture Jesus Christ in glory coming to save. We think of death ending; let us think rather of life beginning, and that more abundantly. We think of losing; let us think of gaining. We think of parting; let us think of meeting. We think of going away; let us think of arriving. And as a voice whispers, "You must go," let us hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, saying, "I will come."

If Jesus thus comes for us at death, we shall never see the grave or the churchyard. They may keep our bodies for a time, but we ourselves shall never die. We go with Jesus.

If Jesus comes for us, we do not go forth into a world of mystery and darkness, knowing not where, nor how far. We simply go with and to Jesus. If Jesus comes for us, we do not go forth alone. When we lose hold of the clasping hands of the most beloved of all on earth, another hand—of One in whom we are all one, and whose love for ever binds us all—holds us fast, and tearful faces are withdrawn only to be replaced by the countenance of One who is bone of our bone, who was a man of sorrows, who himself died, and who, while he takes us away as a triumph of his love, can comfort those we leave behind, even as he comforted Martha and

Mary at Bethany, or his own mother in her hour of agony. It is thus that the one promise, "I will come again and receive you unto myself," should change darkness to light, death to life, the grave to glory, and make us exclaim with the quiet peace, the sober and solemn calm of faith in the midst of much to distract and disturb the soul, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for *Thou* art with me;" if "absent from the body, I am present with the Lord."

III. CHRIST THE PREPARATION FOR HEAVEN.

WE cannot be too habitually or too profoundly impressed by the fact, that the essential elements of heaven and hell are character. Looked at in every light, this conviction must be the result. A lost soul is a soul that has lost God, as darkness is

the loss of light, or of the eye that should see it. A dead soul is a soul that has lost life, and life is the spiritual apprehension and possession of God in love. Hence it was said, when the prodigal found his father and became alive to his love, "My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

You thus perceive that every notion of religion is false, every hope of safety a delusion, every creed a mere form of words, which do not involve the production of that new state of mind, the essence of which is reconciliation to God; friendship, instead of enmity and dislike; the spirit of submission and free obedience, instead of the spirit of self-will and self dependence or independence; and the choice of that kingdom whose law is God's law, whose glory is God's glory.

To each of these conditions of being,

misery or peace is attached by an eternal and unchangeable law, as inexorable, as incapable of being altered, as the character of God. So long as a soul chooses evil, and will not come under law to God, on that wrong state of being the curse of God must rest. There is no escaping it, but by the possession of the right state of being, in which, by the same law, God's blessing must rest. Sin is like a disease which, from its very nature, *must* give pain, while righteousness, like health, must give peace. "Little children let no man deceive you—he that doeth righteousness is righteous—he that committeth sin is of the devil; . . . for this purpose was the Son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." If then heaven is character, we may perceive how heaven begins here just as character begins. It is in this world we can say, "We know we

have passed from death unto life," and are, even here, "partakers of the glory that shall be revealed."

Again, if heaven is character, so heaven is Christ, for there are no two kinds of character there. To be a *Christian* is not a mere play on a word, but expresses the fact, that as love, purity, goodness, truth, mercy, and the like, are one in all beings, so must the believer who possesses them in *kind*, be one with Christ, who possesses them in perfection. He must see his ideal in Christ. He must see all he most loves realized in Christ. He must see the deepest desires of his soul answered in the fulfilment of the promise to be made like Him, and he must recognize it as heaven itself to be with Him and be as He is for ever.

This character is not perfected here. Yet if sin has not been utterly destroyed

in us, its power has. It no longer so reigns in our mortal bodies that we obey its evil desires. It is no longer our master so that we are its slave. We are free, and can say Nay to its commands, and Yea to the will of God. We not only consent to the law that it is good, but can in Christ accept it as our principle of life. If the tree of evil is not dead, the root has been severed, and is dying. If the body has not ascended up on high, it is yet alive and risen from the dead. "If we say that we have no sin, the truth is not in us;" but neither would the truth be in us if we said that sin had dominion over us; and that we had no righteousness. Christ has set us free. His grace is sufficient for us. We know that our Redeemer liveth, and that through him we are more than conquerors. Whatever sin remains, we feel to be under the curse and justly liable to it, but we also

have assured hope of perfect emancipation, both from sin and the curse upon sin. All this we know, and can tell to the glory of Him who is no respecter of persons, but nigh to all that call upon Him in truth, and able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him.

Some, however, prefer the darkness. I do not mean those who are without the knowledge and light necessary to enable them to form that deliberate choice which can alone determine their condition. How God will deal with such I do not know. But if there is any man who from unbelief in God, moral blindness to the character and claims of Christ, the love of pleasure more than of God, sloth and indifference, the enmity of a bold, proud, self-possessed, and presumptuous nature, or from any cause whatever, refuses to come under law to God—that man is not in heaven now

for heaven is not in him, and he cannot see God were he before his throne, nor can he have any fellowship with Christ. He and Christ are opposed. His life is not the life of Christ; his likings and the likings of Christ are wholly different. They live now in different kingdoms, and different modes of being. It would be delusion to speak of hope. Jesus Christ never gave any hope to any man who clung to evil as his good. The joy of the gospel involves terrors. The awful earnestness of God to save from evil, is but one side of that character which condemns evil. All that the Almighty can do to save sinners is done. If this fails, as sure as there is a right and wrong, so sure is it that to those who *will not* be saved, there remains but a fearful looking for of judgment.

There are, lastly, those who think that they can obtain heaven in some other way

than by Christ. It may be that many errors of judgment are mistaken by us for errors of heart; that the Christ whom some men have been doubting or opposing, has not been the true Christ revealed in Scripture, but a false Christ of man's creating; that the gospel which has apparently failed to gain them has not been Christ's gospel; or that their falls into evil have not been their true character, but exceptions to it; or that they have been ignorant of what, if known, would have delivered them. But, making all allowances for human evil or shortcomings—and God will make many more than we can do—yet I see no hope of a man who does not recognize the claims of eternal righteousness, or who does not see them met by Jesus Christ and the gospel, or who does not seek by righteousness to be saved. I would ask such whether he thinks it possible to have a more perfect

embodiment of righteousness than in Christ? or ever to obtain a better character than Christ's? or ever to be in any heaven in which the friendship or fellowship of Christ would not be welcome to him? or on what grounds he hopes to obtain this character more sure and certain, more worthy of God, supported by better evidence, and more adapted to meet his wants, than those revealed by Jesus?

IV. THE JOY OF A SPOTLESS CHARACTER.

“WHO shall present us blameless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.”

I feel how impossible it is for us in this sepulchre in which we live to realize, but in the most imperfect manner, the glory of a faultless character. No doubt it was in Christ, but we are too blind to see that but dimly. It is difficult to believe on the

word of God that every true Christian, however weak, will one day be as faultless as Jesus Christ. But when we believe this, it is still more difficult to know what we believe. I can conceive a young child believing on the word of a parent, that he was in after years to be a great poet, a great statesman, a great man of science; that his name would last as long as the world's history. But could any parent assure his child of this, and could the child believe it, yet how little could he comprehend what he yet believed, and what would be realized! So I believe we shall be like Christ, but, oh! how impossible it is to see, except as one sees the sun through a chink in a prison-house, what it will be to stand before the throne of God, as free from guilt as Jesus Christ, to shine in that great sunlight without a speck or flaw; to be searched by the omniscient and holy eye of God,

the whole heart to be exposed, with all its convictions, all its longings, all its hopes, and that He should say, "I find no fault with this man!" and to have that perfection secured for eternity, until sin is but a memory of a period long past, never more to return.

This does seem to be a hope so vast as to put us to shame. But it is as certain as that God's purpose will be realized, as that Christ's life and death were not in vain, as that Christ's promises are sure, and that the Holy Ghost will glorify the Son by bringing many sons unto glory! But connected with this hope is the exceeding joy.

Here, again, our faith needs to be strengthened. Judging of that future by our present feelings, it is naturally associated with fear—at least an awe mingled with fear. To leave the old familiar world, and all we have hitherto known since we

came into existence; to leave the relations and friends with whom we have mingled from childhood; to part with our trades and occupations, our business and amusements, even those forms with which our religious life has been associated, our Sundays and Bibles, our solitary or social prayers, uttered in our human speech; to pass for ever the grim and inexorable gates of that *to us* new and strange event, death, and then to be at once ushered into the mysteries of the world of living spirits, where all meet, from Adam to the last dead child; to begin a state of things in a place called heaven, under new conditions, new modes of thought, new memories, new anticipations—all this, and all the thoughts that help to make up our ideas of the future, tend rather to confuse, perplex, or appal the mind, so that we are disposed to cling to the present, to clutch at it as a

man would grasp the earth when hanging over a precipice.

But instead of this, we are taught as a fact everywhere in Scripture, that in whatever circumstances we may be placed, whatever visible glory may meet the eye, whatever scenes of unconceived majesty—made up of redeemed men and holy angels, and light ineffable as from the Shekinah of the Godhead—the believer in Jesus who is presented before the presence of his glory *will experience exceeding joy*, though he has passed, like Stephen, from a cruel death, like the thief from a cross, or like the poor afflicted and tormented beggar from his cruel sores and unclean dogs. *That* will be experienced. The glory of that meeting, the glory of that presence, the glory of that royal palace and its King, will be such that the meekest child of earth will be no more disturbed

than John was when leaning on the bosom of the glorious Son of God, nor Mary when pouring oil on his head, nor his mother when she carried him as a babe in her arms at Nazareth. There will be joy, exceeding joy, for us all; and if it were possible that the memory of all we had been, and all we had done, for a moment and for the last time, could express itself in penitential tears, that, like the dew of Hermon, might glisten in the sunbeams of a Saviour's love, those very tears would yet be tears of exceeding joy.

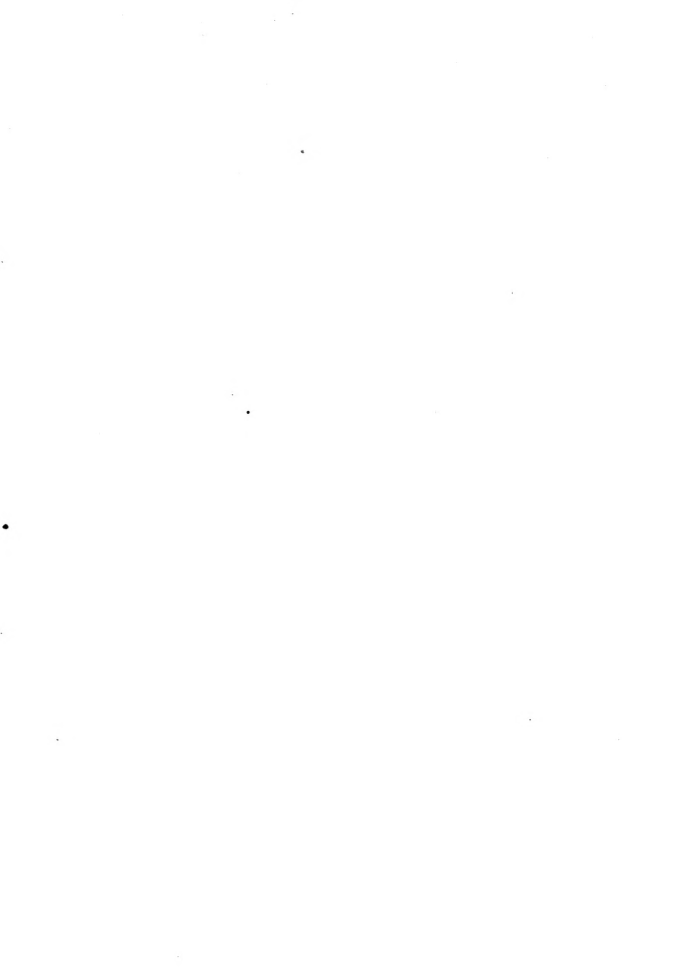
But I think we can discern some elements in this joy. "Old things have passed away." Will it not be joy to meet Jesus Christ? To have passed all the old stages of unbelief in our moral history from its earliest growth until it has in Christ, by Christ, and with Christ reached its perfection; to have passed the period of igno-

rance when we did not know him; to have passed the period of weak faith when to us he was scarcely more than a doctrine or a name; to have passed the better time, yet the weak and imperfect time, when our love was cold, our obedience wavering, and our wills wayward; to have passed away for ever from the time when the flesh warred against the spirit, when we could neither live, nor pray, nor obey, nor rejoice, as we knew we might and ought to have done—a time when our spiritual history was like gleams of sunshine shot through a cloud, rather than a steady light; to have passed away from the time when it seemed impossible for us to love him with all our hearts and to serve him with all our faculties, when we could scarce conceive that we, even by his power, could ever become servants of God; when the future was uncertain, our salvation doubt-

ful, our glory like a dream? To have passed away from all that, and through the deathbed, and out of the grave with perfect safety; to know that we can no more fall again into sin than God descend from his throne; to have the whole soul filled with love that never more can grow dim; to know and feel that we are in a true brotherhood with all the saints of God; that however poor our learning, however feeble our intellects, we shall grow in knowledge and in power for ever; to know that, however unfit we are to take our part in the society of the great and good, we shall do so for ever; that Abraham and Moses and David and Isaiah and Paul, and all the greatest, wisest, noblest of creation will love us—and that not with any condescension, but as we shall love them, with full and hearty admiration, because made worthy of it by the perfection of our

character, and the adornment of our whole being, by the power of Christ and the Holy Ghost; to know that all the universe is ours to study, to understand, to enjoy, and to possess in all its endless vastness of truth and beauty; to know that after endless ages which no arithmetic can number, our life will not be measured, for it is eternal as the life of God. Oh! I know I am speaking as a child might do of the glory of the starry heavens; that I am speaking of what even saints in glory cannot fully realize, for it is infinite—but if this, or even a fraction of this were possessed, and if, *when* possessed, all was felt to be the result of love and love only, but love manifested in the gift of Christ, love embodied and expressed in the Person of Him to whom and by whom we are set in that surpassing glory—what other emotion can be possible than that of “*exceeding joy?*”

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